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THE ABBÉ LE BLANC AND ENGLISH LITERATURE

In the seventeenth century, says Joseph Texte of the French, "nous étions dans l'heureuse persuasion que tout ce qui n'était pas français mangeait du foin et marchait à quatre pattes."¹ The eighteenth century changed that. The current, which in the first quarter of the century had been setting more and more toward England, began in the second quarter to gather more strength for its onward sweep. Not only the Augustans, Addison, Pope, and Swift, were beginning to be known, but even the "barbarian" Shakespeare was awakening curiosity and calling forth a strange mingling of timid admiration and violent abuse. Boyer's early notice of the poet in 1700,² the "Shakees Pear" of the *Journal des savants*,³ the "Chacsper" of the 1715 translation of Collier's *Short View*,⁴ the "Dissertation sur la poésie angloise" in the *Journal littéraire de la Haye*⁵—all these had prepared the way and then had sunk into comparative oblivion at the appearance of men of greater talents whose interests also turned in the same direction.

The Swiss Protestant, Bêat-Louis de Muralt, had been in England as long ago as 1694 and had made good use of his time, but his famous *Lettres sur les Anglois et sur les François*, which Voltaire did not disdain and which Rousseau used and esteemed,⁶ were slow in appearing. Not until 1725 were they published but, as early as 1727, a second edition became necessary.⁷ Muralt apologized for treating such a *bagatelle* as literature and relegated it to a place of secondary importance. Moreover, he preferred Ben Jonson to "Schakspear."⁸

¹ Joseph Texte, *J. J. Rousseau et les origines du cosmopolitisme littéraire* (Paris, 1895), p. 16.

² J. J. Jusserand, *Shakespeare en France sous l'ancien régime* (Paris, 1898), pp. 141-42.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 148-49.

⁶ Cf. my article, "The Sources of Rousseau's Edouard Bomston," *Modern Philology*, XVII, 134-37.

⁷ Muralt, *Lettres sur les Anglois*, 2d ed., Cologne, 1727. Cf., for notice of other rapidly succeeding editions and reprints, Otto von Greyerz, *Introd. to Muralt's Lettres* (Bern, 1897), pp. xviii-xix.

⁸ Muralt, *Lettres*, Cologne, 1727, p. 34.

The attitude of Voltaire as expressed in the *Lettres philosophiques* of 1734 is perhaps too widely stressed. It should be balanced by the more favorable view presented by two works which antedate the *Philosophical Letters*, namely, the *Discours sur la tragédie* prefixed to *Brutus* and published in 1731, and the French version of the *Essai sur la poésie épique* of 1733. In the Preface to *Brutus* for instance, we find Voltaire exclaiming:

Au milieu de tant de fautes grossières, avec quel ravissement je voyais Brutus, tenant encore un poignard teint du sang de César, assembler le peuple romain, et lui parler ainsi du haut de la tribune aux harangues!

In closing, Voltaire writes:

Peut-être les Français ne souffriraient pas que l'on fit paraître sur leurs théâtres un chœur composé d'artisans et de plébéiens romains; que le corps sanglant de César y fût exposé aux yeux du peuple, et qu'on excitât ce peuple à la vengeance du haut de la tribune aux harangues; c'est à la coutume, qui est la reine de ce monde, à changer le goût des nations, et à tourner en plaisir les objets de notre aversion.¹

Here, even taking into account the fact that Voltaire is preparing the public for his own innovations, we have what is really a quite fair and broad-minded attitude. He is sincere in his admiration. His desire to imitate English drama proves that. In the *Discours sur la tragédie* likewise, after admitting that Shakespeare is in part "monstrueux" and "absurde," Voltaire says he must admit that the English are right in admiring him.

Il est impossible que toute une nation se trompe en fait de sentiment, et ait tort d'avoir du plaisir. Ils voyaient comme moi les fautes grossières de leur auteur favori; mais ils sentaient mieux que moi ses beautés, d'autant plus singulières que ce sont des éclairs qui ont brillé dans la nuit la plus profonde.

Then follow these words, which are the high-water mark of Voltaire's appreciation of Shakespeare:

Tel est le privilège du génie d'invention: il se fait une route où personne n'a marché avant lui; il court sans guide, sans art, sans règle; il s'égare dans sa carrière, mais il laisse loin derrière lui tout ce qui n'est que raison et qu'exactitude.²

The passage speaks for itself and needs no further comment.

¹ *Œuvres de Voltaire*, II (Paris, 1883), 316-18.

² *Ibid.*, VIII, 317-18.

In 1738 Louis Riccoboni, the famous Lelio of the *Comédie Italienne*, who had been in England about ten years before at the same time as Voltaire, published his *Réflexions historiques et critiques sur les différens théâtres de l'Europe*, in which, while hesitant and timid, the author nevertheless risks the bold observation that "les beautés des tragédies angloises sont au-dessus de toutes les beautés que les théâtres de l'Europe peuvent nous montrer."¹

The Abbé Prévost too, indefatigable novelist that he was, found time and inclination to spread the vogue of English literature. His first appreciations appeared in Volume V of the *Mémoires d'un homme de qualité* in 1731, the year of Voltaire's Preface to *Brutus*. This success was followed within a few years by other novels, *Cléveland*, whose hero is an Englishman, the *Doyen de Killerine*, whose chief character is an Irish priest, and the *Mémoires de M. de Montcal*, the scene of which is laid in England and Ireland. At the same time appeared the twenty volumes of Prévost's periodical publication, *Le Pour et Contre*,² which made a specialty of English literature. In 1742 Prévost took France by storm with his translation of Richardson's *Pamela*. It is necessary to correct the widely held opinion that Prévost was far in advance of his time and distinguished especially for his enlightened appreciation of Shakespeare. Fair minded and moderate he was and he did much to further the cause of English literature in France, but he must not be thought of as a wildly enthusiastic champion of Shakespearean drama.³ Prévost has had his legend, picturesque, alluring, a piquant contrast to Voltaire, but untrue.

So, with the way thus clearly pointed out, it is not strange that a young man of thirty, eager for a literary career, should in this day turn his steps toward England. In fact, the Abbé Le Blanc bore with him a commission, so to speak, from no less a person than La Chaussée, who wrote him under date of May 1, 1737:

Je ne doute point qu'il n'y ait à profiter sur le Parnasse anglois et je m'en rapporte bien à vous pour ramasser les fleurs qui sont à votre usage et

¹ Riccoboni, *Réflexions*, etc. (Amsterdam, 1740), pp. 138-39.

² Published by Didot (Paris, 1733-40).

³ For a more detailed study of this question, cf. my article, "The Abbé Prévost and Shakespeare," *Modern Philology*, XVII, 177-98.

qui peuvent être transplantées ici. On compte sur vous l'hiver prochain. ... Je vais me mettre à l'anglois et je ferai venir les pièces qu'il faut voir quand on veut se donner une idée du théâtre comique anglois.¹

Whatever La Chaussée may have done with his English,² Le Blanc did not fail to make use of his. In 1737 he began to write to friends of some prominence in France letters on England and the English and continued to do so until 1744. In 1745, under the title of *Lettres d'un François*, the collection was published without chronological arrangement³ in three of those small russet volumes that the eighteenth century loved so well.

The Abbé Le Blanc (Jean Bernard) was born in 1707 and died in 1781. Maupertuis offered him a position at the court of Prussia, but Le Blanc refused it. Through Mme de Pompadour, he obtained the sinecure of "historiographe des batiments du roi," which he kept throughout his life. The author of some verse and of a tragedy, *Aben-Saïd*, which was twelve times played at the Comédie Française, the Abbé Le Blanc chose no ill means of augmenting his fame when he decided to pass seven years in England. In fact, his *Lettres* were read with avidity and brought their author into prominence.

Le Blanc's impression of English character is not essentially different from that given by his predecessors and already becoming traditional.⁴ According to the French writer, the English pride themselves on being reasonable and on thinking deeply,⁵ they are frank,⁶ distinguished for their good sense,⁷ impatient of restraint and tenacious in their purposes,⁸ eccentric,⁹ violent and extreme in

¹ *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* (1919), pp. 98-99.

² M. Jusserand (*op. cit.*, p. 192) thinks that La Chaussée was strongly influenced by English literature. M. Lanson favors the opposite opinion that such influence, if it existed at all, was slight (*Nivelle de La Chaussée et la comédie larmoyante*, pp. 130-31).

³ The *Lettres d'un François* were published by Jean Neaulme at The Hague in 1745 with this introductory note by the editor: "Ces *Lettres* ont été écrites d'Angleterre depuis l'année 1737 jusques vers la fin de l'année dernière 1744. L'auteur qui connoît tout le mérite et de celles que M. de Muralt, et de celles que l'un des plus grands écrivains de notre siècle ont publiées sur les mœurs et le gouvernement des Anglois, ne pensoit point alors à rendre les siennes publiques; ainsi il n'en a point retenu les dates sur des copies qu'il n'avoit gardées que pour son usage particulier: cela est cause qu'on n'a pu les imprimer suivant le tems où elles ont été écrites, et qu'il y en a au III. volume qui devoient être au I."

⁴ Cf. *Modern Philology*, XVII, 131-37, for the views of Muralt, Prévost, and Rousseau.

⁵ Le Blanc, *Lettres d'un François*, I, 2, 92; II, 342; III, 297.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 197.

⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 181.

⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 59.

⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 84-85, 144; III, 294.

everything,¹ intemperate,² of brusque and unpleasing manners,³ afflicted with "spleen,"⁴ of gloomy and harsh exterior,⁵ filled with national pride,⁶ but withal honorable,⁷ kindly, and possessed of very lovable, human qualities,⁸ when once they are known and understood. One should, however, be careful not to form too favorable and exaggerated an opinion of them.

Ce sont des hommes comme les autres, qui connoissent la raison et ne la suivent pas toujours.⁹

Ne croyez pas cependant les Anglois plus sages que nous; leurs ridicules sont différens, mais les hommes sont partout les mêmes.¹⁰

Bien des gens ont peut-être parmi nous une opinion trop favorable des Anglois; ils ne connoissent la nation que par ce qu'elle a de plus poli. ... Des hommes tels que Mylord Boolinbroke, ou Mylord Chesterfield sont rares, non-seulement dans leurs pays, mais dans leur siècle même.¹¹

Moreover, Le Blanc admits frankly the danger of attempting to generalize about a whole nation.

Ces jugemens que l'on porte de toute une nation sont rarement justes et presque toujours téméraires. D'ailleurs il n'est peut-être point de peuple dans l'Europe dont il soit plus difficile de donner une idée générale que de celui parmi lequel je vis aujourd'hui; les Anglois sont aussi différens entre eux que leur nation est elle-même différente des autres.¹²

Finally, he protects himself, or perhaps defends himself, against criticism by this fair, tactful, but cautious statement:

Comme il est de l'homme de se tromper, et de l'honnête homme de reconnoître son erreur, j'avoue de bonne foi que je crains de n'avoir pas connu tout le mérite des Anglois, lorsque j'ai vécu parmi eux. Je puis avoir été choqué de ce qui n'est que l'opposé de nos défauts. Ce qui m'a paru contraire aux bienséances, ne l'est peut-être qu'à nos usages.¹³

As to the vogue of the English language in France, the following passage offers interesting testimony:

Nous avons mis depuis peu leur langue au rang des langues sçavantes; les femmes même l'apprennent, et ont renoncé à l'italien pour étudier celle de ce peuple philosophe. Il n'en est point dans la province d'Armande et de Bélise qui ne veuille sçavoir l'anglois.¹⁴

¹ *Ibid.*, I, 32, 215.

² *Ibid.*, I, 51.

³ *Ibid.*, III, 298.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 237, 251; III, 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 47, 173, 323; II, 69.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 10, 12, 93-94.

⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 294.

⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 15; II, 263; III, 294.

⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, III, 64-65.

¹² *Ibid.*, I, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, III, 379-80.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 334.

English is a harsher language than French, thinks Le Blanc, but in spite of that fact it is a better poetic medium.¹ "Le françois paroît être la langue de la raison, l'anglois celle de l'enthousiasme."² It is especially adapted to rendering expression to the emotions, love, friendship, grief, and despair.³ The English rarely seek anything but force of expression; most of them do not even admit "la distinction des expressions nobles ou basses."⁴ In time doubtless their language will acquire more polish and, like French, lose much of its force while at the same time gaining in beauty.⁵ It goes without saying that, in Le Blanc's opinion, the English lack taste.⁶ Nevertheless, their example can be of use to the French.

Anglois, Italien, François, qu'importe qui nous éclaire, pourvu qu'on nous conduise au sanctuaire de la vérité.⁷

Les François ne sont si remplis de préjugés que parce que ne sortant pas de chez eux, ils ne connoissent pas tout ce qu'ont d'excellent les nations qui nous environnent.⁸

English literature held an important place among the topics treated by Le Blanc's pen. The Augustans of course attract his attention. "M. Pope" is, as one would expect, "le Despréaux d'Angleterre."⁹ It is the comparison already consecrated by Le Blanc's predecessors. Pope is the authority "à qui je m'en rapporte pour tout ce qui regarde les vers anglois."¹⁰ "Les deux Essais de M. Pope que M. l'abbé Du Resnel a mis si heureusement en vers françois ont reçu les applaudissemens qu'ils méritent."¹¹ Pope is cited several times¹² and once is criticized unfavorably,¹³ but nothing of special interest is brought forward. Addison is generally treated with much more respect and is quoted more frequently than Pope.¹⁴ He is "l'auteur anglois qui a le mieux peint les mœurs de sa nation,"¹⁵ though in another place Le Blanc says that "il a flatté sa nation

¹ Le Blanc, I, 305.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 323-24.

² *Ibid.*, I, 306.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 108.

³ *Ibid.*, I, 118.

⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 246. Cf. I, 317-18; II, 203, 216.

⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 249.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, II, 72.

⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 50.

¹² *Ibid.*, II, 56.

⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 159.

¹³ *Ibid.*, III, 337.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 162.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 109, 113, 166, 174; II, 113, 153, 315; III, 75.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 68.

dans les portraits qu'il en a faits."¹ His *Cato* is "une des tragédies qui fait le plus d'honneur au théâtre anglois."² Evidently Le Blanc, like most of his contemporaries, prefers drama that is classical in form. As an example of Steele's work, Le Blanc recommends to his friend, La Chaussée, *The Conscious Lovers*, "une des meilleures comédies du théâtre anglois,"³ translates Act IV, scene 1, and praises the attack on duelling. Since, however, Prévost had already translated the whole play in *Le Pour et Contre*,⁴ Le Blanc's originality is of the slightest. Swift of course—the phrase had been made current by Voltaire—is an English Rabelais.⁵ He is cited a propos of the supposed bad taste of English poets,⁶ and it is noted that the French have welcomed "tout ce qu'on nous a traduit des ouvrages du docteur Swift,"⁷ but Le Blanc, like Prévost⁸ before him, shudders at the bitterly satirical proposal for using the children of the poor people of Ireland as food for the rich.

On sent bien que c'est une satire violente contre le gouvernement d'Angleterre qui tient l'Irlande dans l'oppression. Mais on manque quelquefois le but faute d'adresse. L'auteur a voulu faire rire et il révolte. Une satire qu'on eût pu relire avec plaisir eût sûrement fait plus d'effet qu'un écrit que le dégoût fait tomber des mains.⁹

Shaftesbury, Le Blanc considers "un de leurs plus judicieux critiques,"¹⁰ and his strictures against the English stage as often "une scène de carnage"¹¹ are cited from the *Advice to an Author*. Shaftesbury, like Congreve, Addison, Swift, and Pope, has distinguished himself above most English authors because of his study of "nos bons auteurs du dernier siècle" and of "les grands modèles de l'antiquité."¹² Gay's *Beggars' Opera* arouses Le Blanc's ire. Its characters are "brigands et coupe-jarrets," but it has long entertained the London populace and, Le Blanc notes with regret, continues to do so.¹³ Richardson's *Pamela* has held the Abbé's interest

¹ *Ibid.*, I, 14.

² *Ibid.*, III, 131. Cf. Voltaire, *Œuvres*, II, 322.

³ *Ibid.*, II, 122.

⁴ *Le Pour et Contre*, VIII, 109–321.

⁵ Le Blanc, I, 115.

⁶ Le Blanc, I, 283, note. A translation follows, pp. 284–301.

⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 119.

⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 187, note. Cf. III, 167–68, note b.

⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 209. Cf. III, 184, note a and III, 231, note.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, I, 110–11.

¹² *Ibid.*, II, 72.

¹³ *Le Pour et Contre*, I, 298.

powerfully "malgré les longueurs et un fonds de mœurs basses qui peuvent révolter la plupart des lecteurs."¹

So much for the contemporary, or nearly contemporary, period. Some Restoration writers were also treated by Le Blanc.

Dryden is "un des poètes anglois qui a eu le plus d'esprit."² He is praised for his translation of Virgil.³ *All for Love* is spoken of favorably in one passage and unfavorably in another.

C'est de tous les ouvrages dramatiques de ce poète, celui où il a mis le plus d'art et c'est une des meilleures tragédies du théâtre anglois; elle est traduite dans le *Pour et Contre* de M. l'abbé Prévost.⁴

But a little later the French author writes:

Antoine plongé dans la mollesse perd l'empire de l'univers: c'est ce que M. Dryden appelle le *Monde bien Perdu*. Racine mérite d'être critiqué pour avoir mis sur la scène des héros trop efféminés, mais ce n'étoit pas au poète anglois à lui en faire un reproche.⁵

Evidently the first passage is Le Blanc's real estimate of the play as a whole, while the latter is but the reaction of his national pride against Dryden's criticism of Racine. "Otwai" and Southerne, "deux des plus grands tragiques du théâtre anglois,"⁶ are both criticized for the mingling of tragic and comic elements.

La Venise préservée d'Otway, une des pièces les plus tragiques du théâtre anglois, est coupée à chaque scène par une intrigue du comique le plus bas et le plus trivial. *Oroonoko* et le *Fatal Mariage* de Southern ont le même défaut, ou plutôt c'est celui de beaucoup de tragédies angloises, où il y a d'ailleurs de grandes beautés.⁷

Le Blanc translates for Bouhier Act III, scene 2, of Rowe's *Tamerlane* and comments: Cette scène est traitée avec art et écrite avec beaucoup de force."⁸ Congreve's borrowings from Molière are noted,⁹ but he is called "le comique le plus sage et le premier de tous."¹⁰ The *Way of the World* is praised as his masterpiece¹¹ and as best

¹ Le Blanc, I, 280.

² *Ibid.*, I, 324.

³ *Ibid.*, I, 307.

⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 151-52, note m.

⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 173, note b.

⁶ *Ibid.*, III, 163, note b.

⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 143-44, note x.

⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 198-201.

⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 129-30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 182, note a.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, III, 313-14, note.

portraying his age. Nevertheless, Restoration writers in general receive Le Blanc's condemnation.

Les écrivains de ce tems-là ... ne furent exacts ni sur la morale, ni sur le style. D'un côté ils secouèrent le joug de toute bienséance; de l'autre ils sacrifièrent le jugement à l'esprit, c'est-à-dire, au mauvais goût; car l'esprit affecté ou déplacé est réellement un défaut."¹

Of the poets of the period:

Cowley pétille d'esprit, le Comte de Rochester ne respecte pas même la pudeur, Waller le sage, Waller est peut-être le seul qui se soit préservé de l'une et l'autre contagion.²

Vous me demandez quel étoit ce Waller dont S. Evremond parle avec tant d'éloge. C'est un des auteurs à qui la poésie angloise a le plus d'obligation. C'est le premier de ceux de cette nation qui ait consulté l'harmonie dans l'arrangement des mots [yet Shakespeare had already written!] et suivi le goût dans le choix des idées. Il a autant de galanterie et plus de naturel que Voiture, autant de feu et plus de correction que Chaulieu. C'est de l'avis de ceux qui s'y connoissent, le poète le plus aimable et le plus châtié que les Anglois ayent eu.³

As an example of Waller's work, Le Blanc gives an adaptation of the fable of Apollo and Daphne written for the Countess of Sunderland.⁴ Pryor is barely mentioned,⁵ but Milton rightly receives more consideration than others of his period.

Avec un peu plus de sagesse et de goût, Milton eût fait un chef-d'œuvre de son *Paradis perdu*.⁶

On doit combler d'éloges l'heureux enthousiasme qui a produit un poème tel que le *Paradis perdu*; mais peut-on ne pas condamner en même tems celui d'un lecteur qui se passionnera pour cet ouvrage au point de n'en pas voir les défauts.⁷

Le Blanc observes that it was Addison who raised Milton's work from the neglect into which it had fallen in consequence of his attachment to Cromwell's cause.⁸ The following passage is significant from the point of view of awakening interest in nature. It stresses the subjective attitude and points toward romanticism.

Milton peint non-seulement la fraîcheur du matin et la beauté de l'émail d'une prairie, ou du verd d'une colline, il exprime jusqu'aux sentimens de joye et de plaisir que ces objets excitent dans notre âme.⁹

¹ *Ibid.*, I, 106.

⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 83-84.

⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 250.

² *Ibid.*, I, 106-7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 109.

³ *Ibid.*, II, 82.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 318.

⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 207.

J'aimerois assez vous entretenir de la poésie des anglois; mais Milton dont un de vos confrères nous a donné une si belle traduction, vous en fait mieux connoître le génie que tout ce que je pourrois vous en dire.¹

Finally, Milton receives this high praise:

L'Angleterre a eu plusieurs poètes célèbres. Il en est peu dans aucune nation qu'on puisse comparer à Milton.²

Concerning all the authors so far treated, Le Blanc says much that is judicious and fair, but he discusses none of them in much detail and throughout we feel that the Frenchman has expressed no new and stimulating ideas for the consideration of his countrymen. He cannot in this respect measure up to what had already been done by Muralt, Voltaire, and even Prévost.

One distinction, however, he has, and, either for a Frenchman or for an Englishman of the period, it is no slight one. He has read Chaucer.

L'anglois d'il y a trois ou quatre cens ans étoit encore plus mélangé du françois qu'il ne l'est aujourd'hui. Je ne sçai même si la connoissance de l'anglois de ces tems-là ne seroit pas très utile à ceux qui veulent entendre notre vieux françois. La lecture de Chaucer m'a rendu celle de nos anciens poètes plus facile.³

How much knowledge of Chaucer, Le Blanc may have acquired is problematical, but at any rate it is most interesting to learn that he got even so far as to read him at all.

As we come now to the Elizabethan age, it is of interest to note the pre-eminence Le Blanc accords to it, especially in view of the comparative barrenness of his treatment of other English authors.

C'est sous le règne d'Elizabeth qu'elle [la langue anglaise] en a été le plus près [de la perfection]. Cette langue fut alors enrichie par la traduction de la Bible, de beaucoup de mots et de tours orientaux. Sir Walter Raleigh, un des ministres de cette grande reine, qui elle-même possédoit plusieurs langues, le célèbre Spencer et Fairfax, sont encore comptés au rang des meilleurs écrivains de leur nation.⁴

It is significant that Le Blanc, through Swift, has been led to notice the great part played by the King James Bible in the formation of English style. Voltaire, however, had already called attention to the same fact.

¹ Le Blanc, I, 155.

³ *Ibid.*, I, 104-5.

² *Ibid.*, I, 204.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 105-6.

It remains to treat the most important and interesting part of Le Blanc's literary criticism, that which deals with Shakespeare.

Shakespeare, says Le Blanc, is "le plus original" of all authors ancient or modern, and far superior to his rival, Ben Jonson, who, in Dryden's phrase, is merely "un sçavant plagiaire des anciens." "Il a l'imagination aussi riche que forte; il peint tout ce qu'il voit, et il embellit tout ce qu'il peint." An example of this is the description of Cleopatra's appearance before Antony. But, alas! though Shakespeare rises to the sublime, he sinks also to the lowest depths. "Ceux de nos François qui en ont parlé, l'ont loué et ne l'ont pas jugé."¹ A scene from the first part of *Henry VI* is praised as worthy of the "grand Corneille," and likewise a selection from the second part of *Henry VI*, a translation of which is given, but the comic scenes are severely censured.² Shakespeare is the enemy of all constraint. He wrote his plays, now in prose, now in verse, now with rhyme, now without. His plays contain great beauties, but great faults also.³ His successors have copied his faults, but have lacked his genius.⁴ Nevertheless, he is the poet "qui a le mieux peint et la nature, et les effets des passions et les défauts attachés à l'humanité en général et ceux qui sont particuliers à sa nation."⁵ He is the foremost dramatic author of England, a truly great poet, but no translations in French would do other than harm to his reputation.⁶ In his finest passages he is not inferior to any other author ancient or modern, but unfortunately directly after his best scenes we must expect to find one of the most ridiculous examples of low comedy. The English excuse this, but the French will not be so indulgent. The admiration of the English for Shakespeare is excessive. We, the

¹ Yet already, Voltaire had spoken, Prévost too, and Riccoboni, and none of these had failed to point out "faults." D'Argens in 1738 had written of the "état [de barbarie] du théâtre anglois." "Je n'ai jamais vu tant de génie et si peu de bons ouvrages," and Shakespeare is included in this condemnation (*Lettres juives*, IV, 237).

² Le Blanc, III, 49-63.

³ Cf. Charles Gildon, *Remarks on the Plays of Shakespeare* (Rowe's ed. of Shakespeare, 1709-10), VII, 425.

⁴ Le Blanc, I, 309-10. Cf. Voltaire, *Œuvres*, II, 318.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 182.

⁶ In spite of the great degree of truth contained in this remark as far as translations in French are concerned, it is of some piquancy in view of the fact that La Place's translation appeared in 1745, the same year as Le Blanc's *Lettres*, which thus condemned translations of Shakespeare as of little use after all.

French, would object to seeing the power and sublimity of Corneille mingled with low and trivial comedy, puns, and plays upon words.

Le Blanc translates the speeches of Brutus and of Antony after the death of Caesar, and then comments:

Cette scène, où sont ces deux chefs-d'œuvre, finit par le comique le plus bas et le plus ridicule. Antoine n'a pas plutôt inspiré au peuple l'ardeur de venger la mort de César, qu'on voit paroître un nouveau personnage. Le peuple l'entoure avec empressement, lui demande quel est son nom, d'où il vient et où il va, s'il est garçon ou marié, etc. Il répond qu'il s'appelle Cinna, et aussitôt le peuple s'écrie: "C'est un des conspirateurs, mettons-le en pièces: non, messieurs, dit le pauvre misérable, tout effrayé, je suis Cinna le poète.—N'importe, reprend la populace, déchirons-le pour ses mauvais vers.—Voilà comme finit d'ordinaire tout le tragique de Shakespeare, voilà comme toutes ses pièces sont bigarrées de scènes pathétiques et de scènes bouffonnes."¹

As for the conference between Brutus, Cassius, Octavius, and Antony, "à la grossièreté des injures qu'ils se disent les uns aux autres dans cette entrevue, on ne peut pas les prendre pour des Romains." Prévost's attitude toward a similar criticism is more enlightened.² Shakespeare is not afraid, notes Le Blanc, to bring Caesar on the stage "en bonnet de nuit" (probably nightgown). "Vous sentez par là combien il doit le dégrader." As to Falstaff, he is but a crude buffoon.

A l'égard du style, c'est la partie qui distingue le plus Shakespeare des autres poètes de sa nation, c'est celui où il excelle. Il peint tout ce qu'il exprime. Il anime tout ce qu'il dit. Il parle pour ainsi dire une langue qui lui est propre, et c'est ce qui le rend si difficile à traduire. Il faut pourtant avouer aussi, que si quelquefois ses expressions sont sublimes, souvent il donne dans le gigantesque. Ainsi, dans cette pièce de *Jules-César*, Portia, femme de Brutus, se plaint à lui de ce qu'il a des secrets pour elle, et lui demande si elle ne demeure plus que dans les faubourgs de son bon plaisir? Croiroit-on que cette phrase ridicule pût être de l'auteur de la harangue que vous venez de lire? D'un autre côté, je ne puis passer sous silence un trait de cette tragédie, qui marque, ce me semble, autant de finesse d'esprit que le

¹ Evidently Le Blanc catches no glimpse of the value of such a scene in portraying the fickle violence of a mob.

² *Pour et Contre*, V, 40-41. Of the quarrel between Octavia and Cleopatra, Prévost observes: "Si l'une étoit Romaine et l'autre Reine d'Egypte, elles ne laissent pas toutes deux d'être femmes." Le Blanc, unlike Prévost, thought that a Roman was a super-human being.

discours de Brutus suppose d'élévation. Décimus dit, en parlant de César: "Il se plaît à entendre dire, *qu'on surprend des lions avec des filets et les hommes avec des flatteries, etc., mais quand je lui dis qu'il hait les flatteurs, il m'approuve et ne s'aperçoit pas que c'est en cela que je le flatte le plus.*"

However, when all is said, Shakespeare will never be known by those who do not read English. He cannot be translated and still remain Shakespeare.¹

Le Blanc, even though he found certain details to criticize, deserves special mention for noting Shakespeare's pre-eminence in the matter of style. M. Jusserand has already called attention to the fact.² It is worth noting too that Texte, while he considered the influence of Shakespeare to have been slight in France so far as the development of historical drama and the breaking up of classical tragedy are concerned, attributed great influence to Shakespeare's style.³ This renders the Abbé's observations the more significant.

Le Blanc thinks the English need the bit more than they need the spur. They regard all rules as arbitrary, unwilling to recognize that these rules are but copied

d'après la nature et qu'elles ne sont autre chose que les moyens les plus sûres pour y arriver. Leur fameux Shakespeare est un exemple frappant du danger que l'on court à s'en écarter. Ce poète, un des plus grands génies qui aient peut-être jamais existé, pour avoir ignoré les règles des anciens ou pour n'avoir pas voulu les suivre, n'a pas produit un seul ouvrage qui ne soit un monstre dans son espèce; s'il y a dans tous des endroits admirables, il n'y en a pas un dont on puisse soutenir la lecture d'un bout à l'autre,⁴

all of which is extreme enough to satisfy the most rabid adversary of Shakespeare.

To Crébillon, Le Blanc writes as follows:

Dans vos ouvrages la terreur naît plus de la force des sentimens et de l'énergie des expressions que de l'horreur du spectacle. ... Il n'en est pas ainsi de Shakespeare; quoique personne n'ait donné plus de force que lui à ses expressions, la terreur qu'il inspire est due principalement aux spectacles affreux qu'il expose sous les yeux. Dans sa tragédie du *Maure de Venise* on voit Othello étouffer sa femme dans son lit.⁵

¹ Le Blanc, II, 73-81.

² J. J. Jusserand, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

³ Petit de Julleville, *Histoire de la littérature française*, VII, 721-22.

⁴ Le Blanc, I, 313-14.

⁵ Thomas Rymer in 1693 had summarized his views on *Othello* as follows: "Whatever rubs or difficulty may stick on the Bark, the moral, sure, of this Fable is very instructive. First, This may be a caution to all Maidens of Quality how, without their Parents'

Le Blanc then gives the plot of *Titus Andronicus*, and concludes:

Je finis, monsieur; car je m'imagine que vous n'êtes pas moins las que moi de tant d'horreurs. Quelque méchants que soient les hommes, je doute qu'il y en ait d'aussi abominables que le Maure sanguinaire et la cruelle Tamora. Corneille a fait, dit-on, les hommes plus vertueux et plus grands qu'ils ne sont. On a reproché à Euripide de les avoir fait trop méchants; mais Shakespeare les a faits plus scélérats peut-être que la nature humaine ne la comporte.¹ ... Sans les détails de quelques morceaux pathétiques, on la prendroit plutôt pour le délire d'une imagination déréglée que pour l'ouvrage d'un grand poète.²

Le Blanc's attitude toward *Othello* is entirely conventional for a Frenchman of the time. Especially interesting is the attempt of Le Blanc to shock the great "shocker," Crébillon. We are likely now to forget that Shakespeare ever had any part in the writing of so sanguinary a play as *Titus Andronicus*, but it is not at all strange that Le Blanc should have come upon it and been repelled. He does, however, frankly admit that it is an extreme example, that it is no longer played, and that some in fact do not consider it Shakespeare's work at all.

In another passage addressed to Crébillon, we find Le Blanc interested in the sources of *Hamlet*, *Cymbeline*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Othello*. He summarizes the plot of *Hamlet*, and refers incidentally to the "belle édition des Œuvres de Shakespeare" by Pope. Then follows this interesting comment on the ghosts of Shakespeare's plays:

Les spectateurs ont assez de peine à se défendre de la terreur que les scènes de cette espèce inspirent dans Shakespeare. Il donne à ses expressions une force qui étonne toujours.³ Il anime les phantomes qu'il fait paroître. ... Les objets du monde les plus ridicules, trois sorcières et leur chaudron jouent un très grand rôle dans sa tragédie de *Macbeth*.⁴

consent, they run away with Blackamoors. Secondly, This may be a warning to all good Wives that they look well to their Linnen. Thirdly, This may be a lesson to Husbands that before their Jealousie be Tragical, the proofs may be mathematical" ("Short View of Tragedy," in Spingarn, *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, II, 221).

¹ Le Blanc, III, 87-98.

² *Ibid.*, III, 96.

³ Cf. *supra*, p. 91, the passage on Shakespeare's style.

⁴ Cf. Voltaire, *Œuvres*, II, 320. Cf. D'Argens in the *Lettres juives* (1738). "J'ai vu dans une des plus belles pièces angloises trois sorcières descendre du haut du théâtre à califourchon sur un manche-à-balai, et venir faire bouillir des herbes dans un chaudron" (IV, 236).

He then translates parts of the scenes between the ghost and Hamlet and comments:

C'est dans les scènes de cette espèce que Shakespeare prouve bien qu'il étoit grand poète; plus elles sont contre la nature, plus il y employe d'art et de force pour s'y soutenir. ... La plus grande beauté de cet acte (3^e) et peut-être de toute la tragédie, est ce monologue si célèbre, où il examine si un homme malheureux doit se tuer ou non. M. de Voltaire en a donné une traduction en vers où il a rendu toute la force de l'original, ainsi vous trouverez bon que je vous y renvoye.¹ Il y a aussi des beautés dans la scène où le roi se sent pressé de ses remords.

This scene the Abbé translates, as also the one in which Hamlet refuses to kill the king at prayers. A criticism of the Abbé Prévost follows, but this is based upon a passage which is not really Prévost's own, having been translated by him from the English of Rowe.² Le Blanc continues:

Ophélie, fille de ce seigneur [Polonius], devient folle en apprenant sa mort. Elle est aimée d'Hamlet, mais si peu et d'une façon si singulière que ce n'est pas la peine d'en parler.³ La malheureuse Ophélie à qui la tête a tourné, vient en différentes scènes pour faire, dire, et chanter mille extravagances.

Having thus disposed of Ophelia to his satisfaction, the Abbé turns to the gravediggers and observes:

Cette scène si vantée par les Anglois entre Hamlet et l'un des fossoyeurs commence par de misérables plaisanteries de la part du fossoyeur et finit du côté d'Hamlet par des lieux communs de morale sur la vanité des hommes et sur l'égalité que la mort rétablit entr'eux; le tout à l'occasion d'une tête de mort que le fossoyeur dit être celle d'un nommé Yorick, un fou du roi, qu'Hamlet dans son enfance a beaucoup connu. Shakespeare étoit un grand génie; mais ce n'est pas dans cette scène que j'en chercherois des preuves.⁴

¹ Le Blanc, II, 292. Contrast the *Bibliothèque britannique* (II, 124), which, after translating the Hamlet monologue "aussi littéralement que nous le pourrons sans être absolument barbares ou inintelligibles," remarks: "Voilà à peu près ce que dit Shakespeare: voici ce que M. de Voltaire lui fait dire" (October–December, 1733). After what Le Blanc had previously said about inadequate translations, he seems here to be overawed by Voltaire.

² Cf. my article, "The Abbé Prévost and Shakespeare," in *Modern Philology*, XVII, 198, note.

³ Contrast Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, London, 1908, pp. 68–69.

⁴ This is a stock criticism of the gravedigger scene. Cf. Voltaire, *Lettres phil.* (Lanson ed.), II, 80; Riccoboni, *op. cit.*, p. 128; D'Argens, *op. cit.*, IV, 237; Prévost, *Pour et Contre*, XIV, 66–68.

Le Blanc speaks of Hamlet as moralizing "avec tant d'emphase," translates the speech of the dying Laertes, notes that the stage is left "jonché de corps morts," that the duration of the action is such as to be scarcely exactly known to the author himself, and that "ce poète a fait peu d'ouvrages dont il n'y ait les trois quarts à retrancher." Shakespeare wrote in a barbarous age, it is true, before the French themselves had developed any tragedy at all, but since his time the English have made little progress.

Si les pièces de leurs auteurs modernes sont plus régulières, elles n'ont pas à beaucoup près les mêmes beautés que celles de Shakespeare.¹ Il a su peindre toutes les passions excepté celles de l'amour.² S'il révolte par les petitesse qui lui sont familières, il étonne encore davantage par la sublimité de son génie. Avec tous ses défauts, c'est le plus grand poète que les Anglois ayent eu dans la tragédie. Mais est-il bien vrai qu'en cette partie nous devons aujourd'hui même les regarder comme nos maîtres? Est-il bien vrai qu'en quelque genre que ce soit nous ne puissions les égaler?³

Thus national pride brings the passage to a close.

References to Henry VIII and to King John occur⁴ and there are a few other scattered observations of slighter interest.⁵ Volume III contains also a translation of a work known as the *Supplément du génie, ou l'art de composer des poèmes dramatiques tels que l'ont pratiqué plusieurs auteurs célèbres du théâtre anglois*, written by an author "qui est ici en réputation pour le théâtre et que la discrétion ne me permet pas de nommer."⁶ The notes seem to be by Le Blanc himself. The text is a satire on English drama, the old sad story of indifference to the unities, the mingling of tragic and comic elements, etc.

In conclusion, what may we say of Le Blanc's treatment of English literature? Pope we find to be treated favorably, but what little is said is without special interest. Addison's *Cato* is praised, a fact which shows that Le Blanc is inclined to look favorably upon

¹ After all, Le Blanc does not really prefer plays like Addison's *Cato*. Cf. *supra*.

² By which strange exception must be meant drawing-room love à la *Marivaux* or perhaps à la *Crébillon fils*.

³ Le Blanc, II, 286-302.

⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 168, notes.

⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 142, note *g*; 161, note *d*; 163, note *a*; 181, note *a*; 189, note *b*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, III, 135-95.

drama which is classical in form. Steele's *Conscious Lovers* is mentioned very favorably, but this praise comes lagging along after Prévost's. Swift is praised, but his satirical genius is neither understood nor appreciated. Shaftesbury is esteemed highly as a critic in sympathy with the French spirit. Gay's *Beggars' Opera* is severely censured. Le Blanc considers Richardson's *Pamela* interesting, but long drawn out, a verdict which is probably acceptable to most moderns. Dryden's *All for Love* is praised. Otway and Southerne are called great but are criticized for the mingling of tragic and comic, and Congreve is praised. In general, however, the Restoration period is condemned as to both style and morality. Waller is excepted from this condemnation, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* is praised highly, though considered somewhat lacking in "sagesse" and "goût." Raleigh, Spencer, and Fairfax are mentioned, and attention is called to the influence of the Bible upon English style. Chaucer has been read with interest. In short, all this is very fragmentary criticism, which could have had little influence, but it is interesting as an indication of the sort of impressions a Frenchman like Le Blanc brought back with him from England. Shakespeare is deserving of a more detailed summary.

In his treatment of Shakespeare, Le Blanc has obviously tried to be fair, but his regard for the "bienséances" is too great for him to be able to accept the mingling of tragic and comic elements or to appreciate their significance as a more complete and less artificial portrayal of life. It is that inability in one form or another which constantly prevents him from showing a more complete understanding or admiration of Shakespeare. *Henry VI* has interested him. It is worth noting that he has not overlooked Shakespeare's historical drama, since only two years later (1747) Hénault brought out his *François II*, which was admittedly inspired by Shakespeare's history plays.¹ Of course it is not certain that there is connection between Hénault and Le Blanc, especially since La Place's translations of Shakespeare intervene (1745). However, Le Blanc is at least pointing the way in a new direction, which unfortunately was not soon followed by men of sufficient genius to establish historical drama on the French stage. *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet* call

¹ H. Lion, *Le Président Hénault* (1903), pp. 236 ff.

forth interesting comments on the part of the Abbé, but on the whole it is more criticism of "faults" than of "beauties." For this, however, there was no lack of precedent in England itself, and this should not be forgotten in estimating French criticism of the period. Not to make further mention of Rymer, Charles Gildon (1665-1724) had remarked that "Shakespeare is indeed stor'd with a great many beauties, but they are in a heap of rubbish."¹ Rowe (1674-1718), however, had expressed the wish that Rymer had not limited his attention to the faults, but had "observ'd some of the beauties too, as I think it became an exact and equal critique to do. It seems strange that he should allow nothing good in the whole."² Le Blanc's judgments, as those of a man only moderately gifted, represent better than would those of a man of genius the attitude of the average cultivated public of the time, interested in foreign literature to an increasing extent, willing to treat Shakespeare, while criticizing him, with much the same courtesy they would have used in society, but not extremely enthusiastic as yet and not able to accept the mingling of tragic and comic elements in tragedy. It is noteworthy that Le Blanc, like his predecessors, seems uninterested in Shakespearean comedy. It is not probable that Le Blanc's *Lettres* had great influence. They were too readily absorbed by the great current of interest that was being directed toward England by men of greater abilities than he. However, they do help to furnish a sort of barometer of the attitude of the cultivated French public at the time when the first translation of Shakespeare's works appeared.³ It is of interest too that many of his letters were addressed to Buffon, La Chaussée, Duclos, Bouhier, Freret, Crébillon père, Crébillon fils, Du Bos, and Montesquieu, as well as to others of lesser prominence.⁴ To have brought English literature increasingly to the attention of these men is to have rendered valuable service.

¹ Charles Gildon, *op. cit.*, p. 425.

² Rowe, *Introduction to Shakespeare's Works*, I (1709), xxxiv-xxxv.

³ La Place's partial translation in 1745.

⁴ Ninety-two letters in all, addressed as follows: Buffon, 19; La Chaussée, 7; M. H ..., 6; M. le Marquis du T ..., 5; M. l'abbé d'Olivet, 5; M. Du Clos, 5; M. le Chevalier de B ..., 4; M. Freret, 4; M. le Président Bouhier, 4; M. le Marquis de G ..., 3; M. le Duc de Nivernois, 3; M. de Crébillon, 3; M.L.A.H. ..., 3; M. le Marquis de Lomellini, 3; M. l'Abbé Du Bos, 2; M. de Crébillon fils, 2; M. le Duc de C ..., 2; M. l'Abbé Sallier, 2; M. le Comte de C ..., 2; M. l'Abbé L. C ..., 2; M. le Président de Montesquieu 2; M. l'Abbé Gédouin, 1; M. de Montcrif, 1; M. l'Abbé Rothelin, 1; M. de Maupertuis, 1.

Of the style of Shakespeare, Le Blanc had spoken most worthily. He had not failed to note its power and its beauty, the force of Shakespeare's expressions, the vividness and reality of the best scenes, the manner in which the supernatural element was used to grip the spectator and compel his attention. The Abbé had seen too that much of this power was lost in translation and could never be felt by a Frenchman who did not know English. In his objection to frequent changes of scene and the lapse of time, as well as to the scenes of buffoonery, Le Blanc was of his time and of his nation, but it should not be forgotten that even now Shakespeare is scarcely given on the stage without omissions and that some plays where there is greatest violation of the unities are almost impossible of satisfactory presentation before a modern audience. The tendency of modern drama is certainly in the main toward the unities, sanely interpreted, rather than away from them. No one but Shakespeare has to so great a degree been able to be a law unto himself. His success has rather been in spite of his disregard of the unities than because of it. Le Blanc's greatest shortcoming is in not fully sensing the great throbbing human life in Shakespeare's work and seeing that it is this which justifies the methods exemplified in his greatest plays.

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